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ABSTRACT

The experience of Maryland in implementing large scale assessment in the context of school reform is explored. The ways in which the state Department of Education has worked with divergent groups to build a continuing and strong school reform program are discussed. In 1987 Maryland's governor created a Commission on School Performance. This was the first time that a major educational reform in the state was not directed by the education community. In carrying out recommendations of this Commission, the Department of Education has faced challenges in the following areas: (1) the changing nature of learning in the information age; (2) changing expectations of the public; (3) increasingly large amounts of state and local money needed to fund education; (4) changes in the student population and increased student diversity; and (5) the national politicalization of education. Support from the state's governor, its Board of Education, the legislature, local school systems, teacher, parents, the community, the Religious Right, and businesses has been crucial to the implementation of reform, including the reform of assessment. The process known as reconstitution makes Maryland schools accountable for test results, and a strong test security program makes students accountable for individual results. Sustaining reforms will require a strong focus on public understanding and support and the involvement of the state legislature and the state's teachers. (SLD)

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National Conference on Large Scale Assessment

Sheraton Colorado Springs Hotel

June 16, 1997 11:30-1:30 pm

Speaking Points

Dr. Nancy S. Grasmick

Maryland State Superintendent of Schools

Title: The Politics of Large Scale Assessment

Introductory Statement

When we think of assessment, we think of tests and all the essential elements needed to create an effective and reliable test. We think of report cards or reports which proffer testing results. We may not often think of tests in the context of school reform, the politics of testing, and the political influences which must be considered in the development of any reform program. Today, I am going to speak about Maryland's experience, some of the issues we have encountered in our school reform program and some ways we have worked with many divergent groups to build a continuing and strong school reform program.

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Brief History

Until the late 1980's, nationally and in Maryland education was viewed as an independent, somewhat isolated discipline. Teachers taught, principals ran schools, and administrators took care of relationships with local and state governments. Most of the discussion with state and local governments centered around budgets. Reforms were internally directed by educators. Community involvement was limited to isolated issues such as school boundaries, school closings, etc.

In Maryland, in 1987, Governor Schaefer created a Commission on School Performance that was chaired by a prominent business leader, included only one teacher among its membership. This was the first time that a major educational reform effort was not directed by the education community. In recognition of the importance of education and educational leadership, he cover letter transmitting the report to the Governor stated:

> We are confident that those in the educational community to whom you (Governor) look for implementation of our recommendations will see them not as an assault on their traditional practices, but as an opportunity for enhancement of the discharge of the vital responsibilities entrusted to them by their fellow citizens.

For Maryland, the 32 page Sondheim Commission report, has remained the State's vision of educational reform. It established the vision and model of what we are trying to accomplish today. The recommendations were comprehensive and focused on results, accountability, rewards and sanctions.

On the national scene, during the same period (1989), Governor Bush convened a meeting at Charlottesville, setting six ambitious goals for students to reach by 2000.

What are some of the issues that have confronted us during the implementation of education reform?

- **Changing nature of learning**--from one of facts and figures to a combination of facts with an ability to use and apply those facts in problem-solving--related to rapid technology change. We are changing from an industrial society to one focused on information. Increasingly a high school education is no longer sufficient for the jobs of the 21st century.

- **Changing expectations of the public**. "Soccer mom" philosophy, the Involvement of women in politics. Education one of the issues highest on everyone's agenda.

- **Increasingly large amounts of state and local money needed to fund education.** In Maryland, education funding is 20% of the state budget. Only health (which includes Medicaid) has a slightly larger percentage (22%) of the budget. In local budgets, education funding

also represents a substantial cost of local government. Approximately 50% of the funding for education comes from local government.

- **Changes in the student population**--diversity--many with needs which could not be met by school systems; large number of special education students. In Maryland, we have a rapidly expanding population including an increasing number of immigrants and a small baby boomlet.
- **The national politicalization of education**-- increasing involvement of Presidents and governors to take on this issue as one of government reform. Also a consequence of the increasing funding needs of schools caused by increasing student populations, decreasing or flat property tax bases, and the increasing number of immigrants and children from at-risk households.

What are some of the political groups and issues that have impacted the Maryland School Performance Program, the state's assessment program?

- **Gubernatoriai support**--Current Governor made education and accountability a major part of his platform. Previous Governor responsible for Sondheim and Hutchinson Commission. Education has strong support from Governor. Governor remains committed to high funding levels for education

- **State Board of Education**--Pro-education board. Appointed by Governor. Supportive of accountability systems.

State Legislature--driven by increased funding requests and the quest for "results"; knowledge that funds have been used wisely. Excellent support

- **Local School Systems**--Superintendents--must obtain involvement and support

- **Baltimore City Issues**--accountability and funding, governance, change in governance, and management reform

- **Teacher's Unions**--pay, benefits, accountability

- **Teachers**--Professional Development, a key

- **Religious Right**--values, outcomes, results, vs. Critical and higher-order thinking skills. Worried about limiting choices.

- **Parents**--increasing involvement as education becomes very different from the model that was used when they were growing up. Also the desire to ensure that their children succeed.

- **Business**--Maryland Business Roundtable for Education. Education to support state economic development with a prepared workforce.

What are some strategies we use in Maryland to obtain political support for MSPP?

- **Emphasize a system of reform with accountability, not a test**

  In Maryland, we have functional tests, performance assessments, school rewards, an accountability process known as reconstitution. Through the reconstitution process, schools and school systems are held accountable for test results. Through a strong test security system individual students are held accountable. Our proposed high school assessment system will focus on individual results.

- **Strong focus on public understanding and support**

  We must work with the public to encourage them to become a partner with us in this effort.

  Keep a steady stream of information going to multiple groups--key stakeholders, parents, the public and the media (print and broadcast)

  Devise a listening strategy through surveys, focus groups, forums, committees, and school improvement teams (which include parents and students).

  Show evidence of change--"we have listened and made changes." Any system must include ability to be modified based on instructional shifts and shifts in public attitude.

Work closely and continually with the State Legislature

Maintain formal communication through letters, reports, hearings. Initiate information communication--personal meetings, telephone calls, small group meeting to provide information and clarify issues.

Establish and maintain committees with divergent viewpoints to provide a forum for the substantive exchange of ideas.

Eg. High School Assessment Committee, MSPAP committees. Include as many stakeholders as possible, educators, administrators, business, advocacy groups, higher education, etc.

Involve the teachers!

Maryland hires its teachers to score the tests over the summer. This serves as a staff development tool. For the assessment to work, teachers must be involved and committed to change. Include teachers unions in the process.

Sustain the effort

The secret is perserverance and sustained effort. Secretary Riley says, "You have to take it child by child, school by school. You'll never get anywhere if you keep changing all the time."